

Sure, there is the obligatory love angle, jealousy and tragic death, but what do you expect? This is, after all, an opera.

Not content to have his magnum opus feature toreros and pasodoble music, Penella augmented the taurine atmosphere by writing into the score such inclusions as crowd noises (cheers, *olé*s, cries for *¡Música!* *¡Música!*, gasps and screams) and other sounds of the bullring, including *cascabeles* -- the bells attached to the harnesses of the *mulillas de arrastre* -- and the *clarines* and kettle drums used by the *autoridad* to signal commands to the ring. All of these accompaniments are heard as part of the pasodoble *El Gato Montés*, eliciting this thought from co-author Diaz: "In my mind's eye, no other melody better conveys the kinetic nature of the *corrida*, the sense of a charging bull, the tidal rhythms of a *lidia*, the successive buildup and release of tension that occurs as a *faena* unfolds, and the excitement of being in a *plaza de toros*."

In staging the opera's comeback in the 1990s, artistic director (and featured singer) Plácido Domingo added yet another plus: during the *faena* sequences in the bullring, actual black and white silent movie footage from a 1930s *corrida* was shown superimposed onto a gauze curtain dropped in front of the set; the pasodoble *El Gato Montés* played by the orchestra, along with the crowd noises, made it all very effective.

Spanish speakers enjoying the opera will note right away that the words sung (there are no spoken lines) are in *andalú*, the peculiar dialect of Andalucía, and there are many, many references to things taurine which employ the true vernacular of the bullring. On the other hand, the English translations usually available sound ridiculous to the true aficionado -- a *mozo de espadas*, for example, becomes a "rapier carrier," while the taking of the *alternativa* is called "receiving a license." Best to stick with the original lingo, we opine.

To appreciate the authentic taurine information included in this opera, we will quote a few lines from some of the scenes specifically dealing with the

corrida. But we will do that as a sort of "padding" to our synopsis of Penella's masterpiece, which we shall begin now, using our own English translation and taurine terms, rather than the rather stilted and, we think, often downright funny "official" English version.

THE OPERA: HIGHLIGHTS AND SOME DIALOG

The novillero Rafael Ruiz "El Macareno" has just two days ago taken the *alternativa* in Madrid, in a *corrida* featuring Miuras; ignoring an inconsequential *cogida*, he has triumphed and is now en route to his mother's home in Andalucía. Outside her house, awaiting his return, are his sweetheart Soleá, his adoring mother Frasquita and Padre Antón, his godfather and the priest who baptized him -- along with many other *jóvenes* who grew up to be toreros. A hardcore aficionado himself, Padre Antón boasts, "Boys I baptize kill more than do the measles," and he speaks of having "given the salt" to quite a few matadors in his time, mentioning several of them by name.

Now Rafael enters the village with his picador and confidant "Hormigón" ("Big Ant" -- with a strong "bite") and others of his *cuadrilla*, cheered on by local admirers. While Rafael embraces his loved ones, "Hormigón" delights Padre Antón and the crowd with an expansive report of "El Macareno's" *alternativa* and success in Madrid. The picador then gives Padre Antón a newspaper he has brought with him from the capital, and the priest excitedly reads from it, aloud:

"The first bull comes into the ring, a berrendo en colorao, handsome and well armed. And immediately 'El Macareno' performs six *verónicas* to *olé*s, very close in and standing very still." The reading by the cleric is met with enthusiastic comments by the villagers.

"Then during the *quites*, the bull already mesmerized, he lavishly displays taurine prowess. Next he takes the sticks and nails three pairs al quiebro in the pincushion . . . and without moving his feet." The crowd of listeners around the priest buzzes.

"He dedicates the toro to el presidente," the padre continues, "and orders his people to the callejón."

"Not a single peón remains!" interjects Rafael's *mozo de espadas*.

Padre Antón goes on: "He unfurls the muleta and on giving the first pase natural he snags a horn." ("It was the sun!" the picador and swordhandler shout in unison, in defense of their matador; then the reading resumes.) "He gives it four pases de pecho brushing against the bull's flanks while mixing in a great *molinete*." The crowd is lapping it up.

"And as soon as he gets the Miura cuadrado, going straight in for the kill, he plunges the estoque in, hasta la mano."

Here the two peones shout, "He's soaked all the way to his elbow!"

"The bull rolls over," Padre Antón continues, "without the *puntilla*."

"He cut an ear!" the picador and the *mozo* cry out joyfully.

(The above dialog, clearly, was written by someone who had much more than casual knowledge of the *corrida*.)

Now, this being an opera, no one should be surprised when a gypsy woman shows up and reads Rafael's palm, predicting -- what else? -- his death on the horns of the bull. (When this damned woman came onstage at the performance we attended, we immediately leaped to our feet and shouted, "No! No!" to the matador when she reached for his hand. Alas, he paid us no heed. Pray tell, who of your mind would permit a gypsy fortuneteller to read his or her palm, if one found oneself cast as a matador in a tragic opera? Locura.)

Well, back to the plot. Now appears the character for whom the pasodoble and the opera are named: the bandit Juanillo, known far and wide as El Gato Montés, the Wildcat, who lives in some nearby mountains with his band of fellow bandidos and who has, shall we say, the hots for Soleá. In fact, so heated became one dispute with another of her admirers sometime in the past that the Cat killed the competition and is therefore a fugitive. Now he shows up and rains on Rafael's victory parade, declaring that Soleá